

ARCHEOLOGY METHODS AND INTERPRETATION

Uncovering History

How do we learn about the lives of those who came before us? Old documents such as letters, diaries, and land deeds tell us about particular people, places, and events. Yet written records do not always survive, and most were produced by and for society's elite. The details of everyday life are rarely mentioned in historical documents. Often the poor and the enslaved appear as little more than figures in a ledger or numbers in a tax or census record. We must look beyond the written record in order to better understand the lives of people from all levels of society.

Surviving documents associated with the President's House tell us about important events that took place in the house and identify some of the people who lived, worked, or visited there. However,



Household items uncovered in a privy excavated in Independence National Historical Park, 2003.

learning more about the lives of these individuals requires that we find additional sources of evidence. By studying the excavated artifacts left behind by those who once inhabited this site, archeologists hope to better understand the lives of all who lived and labored here.

Clues to Our Past

A sewing needle falls through a gap in the floorboards... a child's toy is lost and forgotten in the yard... a broken dish is tossed down an abandoned well...

People leave behind physical traces of their daily lives wherever they live, work, and play. Archeologists examine the places once inhabited by people and recover these long forgotten clues to our past. Through the excavation and analysis of these recovered artifacts, we can learn about the food people ate, the clothes they wore, the ways they entertained themselves, the diseases they suffered from, and even their beliefs and cultural traditions.

Archeology at the President's House Site

Buildings and other construction on this site over the past 200 years have destroyed much of the physical evidence of the President's House. Only small portions of the foundation ruins and yard areas of the President's House are likely to have survived. But the lower, deeper portions of the privies (outhouses) and wells once used by the inhabitants of the President's House may have escaped destruction. These brick-lined shafts often served as convenient trash receptacles. Archeologists excavate shaft features because they sometimes contain the debris of daily life. Broken dishes, bottles, pins, animal bones, seeds, jewelry, buttons, and buckles may lay hidden deep beneath the ground in a forgotten privy or well shaft.

When deposits of household trash are found within these deep features, the study of this material can reveal in great detail aspects of daily life that are otherwise absent in historical documents. Such deposits can illuminate the lives of all strata of society.

Digging Deeper: Toward a More Complete Past

Archeological research at the President's House site helps us ask and answer new questions about what life was like for all the inhabitants of this house.

What was daily life like for those who lived and worked in the President's House?

Can artifacts associated with enslaved Africans who lived and worked on the site during President Washington's tenure be identified? If so, how do these possessions compare to those used by free persons occupying the site?

What do the recovered artifacts tell us about the beliefs and traditions of the people (enslaved and free) who owned and used them?

Did the objects possessed by enslaved Africans, and the spaces in which they were used, help individuals maintain an identity separate and distinct from the free occupants of the President's House?

Do the recovered artifacts tell us more about the different lifestyles in the Washington and Adams households (one relatively opulent and the other more modest)?



Plate fragment from the house site of James Oronoco Dexter, a free African coachman and community leader. Exacavated in Independence National Park in 2003.

Want to Learn More?

Any artifacts unearthed from the President's House site will be sent to the Independence Living History Center Archeology Lab for analysis. The working archeology lab is open to the public and all visitors are welcome. The lab is located at 3rd & Chestnut Streets and is open Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. – 5 p.m. Admission is free.